For Stewart Brand and Jon McIntire
From Howard Rheingold
January 28, 1992

This is not a plan. This is a step toward creating a plan. The idea is to grow a solution. I'm putting this out as the way I see things. I see only part of the spectrum. If the three of us could see the outlines of a real plan, we could write it down on a few pieces of paper and see if we could find a way to make it happen.

What Is Point?

Point points: *it directs attention.* The catalogs, books, magazines, multimedia, online community, and events are different means for accomplishing the same two tasks: directing people's attention to the tools they need to think and live for themselves; and introducing the tool-wielders and tool-makers to each other.

The right individual or small group, provided that they are mentally prepared and that someone has directed their attention to the right things, can move the tiprudders that move the big rudders. We inspire, inform, and recharge these people; they sustain us.

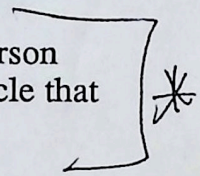
The network of remarkable people who have been attracted to Point and have helped keep it alive have great potential power; that power can be converted to wealth or attention or influence, but only if somebody who knows how to do that is directing the enterprise. Point has the power of a network of networks of people who have learned what works and what doesn't work in the tiprudder game. They still rely on us to cull the information stream, to put the information together in packages that continue to be different from the way other information packagers do it, to inject new and startling points of view, to direct them to the tools and ideas they need, and to encourage them by example to go Further.

That information-to-the-tiprudder-people mission is the existential center of Point, and that is why all business considerations have to be seen in the context of that mission.

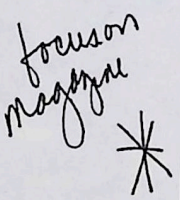
Point not only points, people point Point: the network of Whole Earth loyalists directs a constant and varied stream of information to Gate Five Road. The unduplicatable value that is added to the incoming information happens when it is filtered, evaluated, blended, set into a

context and broadcast back out to the network; this is where the editor must work magic beyond what they teach in journalism school. Think of the past editors of WER and their contributing editors as a set of tuned filters; each of them are people who have developed antennae for different parts of the spectrum to detect faint signals from the fringes, and decide which are most valuable: Stewart, Art, Kevin, Howard, Jay, Anne, were the conductors of that information stream and the final gatekeepers of what went into an issue. There is a rich second tier: Richard Nilsen, Robert Horvitz, and others. The editor is the primary source of ideas, but not the only source; the editor also manages a network of other editors. I think there is power in tuning the editorial network as well as the network of readers and contributors.

If you look at it strictly as a business enterprise, it's hard to say where you can get the wherewithal to take Point where it needs to go in the 1990s. This isn't the best time to grow a business...if it's a conventional business. I believe that if you find somebody who can use the power of the network and people's sense of mission, the wherewithal can be found or created. The task is more like a conjuration than an algorithm. The essential element that is in dangerously low supply right now is a person with a vision of Point as a multidimensional attention-directing vehicle that can go to a lot of places and bring the world along with it.



What Could Point Become?



Point must expand the influence of the magazine and give it what is needed so WER can keep reinventing itself. Before concentrating on other parts of the vision, it is necessary to make sure that the magazine is not only healthy but growing and inspired. Point has a unique information-gathering-evaluating-and-presenting capacity, and we have the potential to use the information in a wide variety of ways, but the magazine is the axle of the vehicle. The other wheels won't turn easily if it's broken — except for the WELL, which has its own momentum. And the editor is the linchpin. If the magazine is healthy, you can look at book publishing, multimedia publishing, radio, public events, and other possibilities. What Point can grow into is an ecosystem of information providers, filterers, and gatherers. That scenario would involve an ensemble of editors who work more or less autonomously but are in good communication with one another, all attuned by somebody who is able to manage such a circus full of prima-donnas.

There is more to be said about each of these topics in terms of fleshing out a picture of the whole vision, but here is my take on them, briefly:

- **Radio:**

I never cease to be amazed at the reach of NPR in terms of the kinds of people we want to subscribe to the magazine and log into the WELL. Various proposals have been made, and we have a wealth of radio talent via the WELL, but nothing has happened. Perhaps the right person could make it happen. Point probably would not turn a profit on it, but it would accomplish the two ends of being a free advertisement to the right people (which could be coordinated with a direct mail campaign), and it will get good information out on environmental restoration, home schooling and education alternatives, energy and tool-use, questioning and forecasting technology, emerging cultural trends, cultural survival, land use, community. It might be the kind of thing you can get a grant to do from someone like the Markle foundation; that we are a non-profit without a grant-writer on staff or working regularly with us on a project by project basis is more than a little weird. Somebody out there knows how to work the grant machinery. Not that we should be dependent upon grants; I think we ought to try, however, and see if there is anything out there, especially for something like the radio project.

The leverage here is the editorial function we already have working : The ensemble of editors already put our energy into gathering and sorting the info; if a semi-autonomous radio producer came and got that information and did everything else required to bring it to the air, it would make only small additional demands on our resources. There should be motivation for the contributing editors to want to do it, though, on top of everything else they are doing. If Point ends up doing books, events, electronic publishing, the radio program would be free advertising for those activities, as well.

It might be that a radio program would become more attractive to NPR and when the circulation of the magazine increases significantly.

- **Book publishing:**

The key issue right now is why doesn't 10-Speed Press, who have had several meetings with Kelly and Keith and Jonathan and I for about a year now, making any offers? Right after that is why don't we send proposals to New York if 10-Speed doesn't make an offer? Why not David Stanford, for example? Point couldn't work out a deal with Gunderloy that we could all afford to do, so he did the Zines book with David Stanford; it would have been a nice book for us to do, but there wasn't enough money in it, which is the problem with packaging books and running a magazine at the same time these days. There is no guarantee that we could get enough

money, in New York or locally, to justify doing books the way Point has always done books, as a packager. Not if we have to produce significant numbers of new pages. However, we have a wealth of material published in the magazine in the past that could be compiled with a small amount of new material and some new editorial glue. We have pulled ample rich material on Community, Education, and Aging and put them into binders that remain stacked up in an office somewhere at Point or 10-Speed.

There are other ideas for Whole Earth books. Jonathan E proposed recently that we might do a book of checklists: What to do in case of an earthquake or urban wildfire, what to bring on an ethobotanical expedition, how to set up a BBS, how to stay warm in the winter, how to set up cohousing or LETS — all that material also would be derived from previously published material. We might even use most of the existing boards that have already been edited, proofed, typeset, and pasted down — which is the source of financial leverage. Two other ideas are probably the best candidates for book projects: First is Peter Calthorpe's book, to be edited by Richard Nilsen — is it negotiated with 10-Speed yet? That deal must be closed soon. The next best bet is Jay Baldwin as editor of a book about Questioning Technology, drawing on and expanding the material in the latest issue, including material from past issues, with some introductory material by him and me..

There is plenty of excellent material. Good ideas are not the problem; bringing the best of them to completion is what is needed. It might be worth a concerted, professional effort to see if there is a publisher with vision out there who can spend the money needed. If not, Point should drop the idea of books for a while. If that list of book possibilities — Calthorpe, Questioning Technology, Community, Aging, Whole Earth Checklists, doesn't yield two viable projects, it's hard to think of what else would work as a book. If the other projects work out, then a revised and updated version of Signal and another book on restoration might be possible, but there's no sense recycling the recycled material unless we have a Whole Earth line of books in the pipeline.

- **Multimedia:**

? Point was way ahead of the curve on multimedia with the Electronic WEC. A year from now, there will be a market for the right kind of CD-ROM project. A year ago, I asked Tim Oren what the next Point multimedia project should be. Without hesitation, he answered, "World Music." It made sense to me immediately. I pitched it to Kelly a year and a half ago. I also mentioned to Stewart and Peter Schwartz back then that Peter Gabriel might be interested in something like this. Brian Eno might be interested, for that matter. Or Mickey Hart. We happen to have Jonathan

E., who has a lot of attitude, and also has a lot of knowledge about the subject. Point has access to the best multimedia producers in the business, software vendors, domain experts, bankable names. The subject matter of World Music, with video interviews, photos, graphics of the musicians and their cultures, is a good fit with Point's cultural mission and its reputation. It's a highly specific idea that might fly very fast because the idea is right and the time is right; if not, it probably isn't worth pursuing now. But the potential seems high enough to invest a a day or two of serious inquiry.

- **Online Publishing**

Joining the Internet was a major event for the WELL. It's in a much bigger league now. And we have strong allies all over the net. WELL might remain at the pivot of change over the next ten years, if it grows intelligently along with the capabilities of the technology and the popularity of the service. The Point director has to have an understanding for what the WELL is as a culture and a business, and some savvy about how to grow under the pressure of success. Popularity is not a problem; the word on the mojo-wires has reached critical mass. Managing growth is the challenge now. Five years from now, the WELL could be an even more powerful vehicle for people, and a very profitable business.

- **Public Events**

Events is a Point activity where we have lost some momentum recently, but still have a lot of rep left over from past events. For all its faults, Cyberthon was one of those legendary events that has achieved You Had To Have Been There status. If we came up with the right kind of event at the right kind of price, we could cash in on the fact that so many people were clamoring to get into Cyberthon, when the word began to spread that something was really happening. It has to be an event that is nothing and everything like all the events that preceded it. Think of the historical thread and the way it meanders around a certain basin of attraction that has to do with putting the right people together at the right time and doing the right thing to their minds: Whatever It Is, Trips Festival, New Games, the event where Stewart tried to give the money away, Hackers, Cyberthon. This one takes some doing by someone who knows how to go about it. And it needs the right vision.

What should the next Point event be? The answer to that question might put a lot of the other pieces of this puzzle into place. One word, or two, could articulate something that would make sense of a proposal.

What does Point need most now?

A bold plan. There are some cautious plans in existence, and they should not be discarded, but somebody needs to leapfrog while the cautious plan plods along. There just isn't the juice left to hang out the four years it would take for even the most successful direct mail sub campaign. Why not come up with a clearly articulated vision of Point as it ought to be, then see if there is potential for raising the money to achieve that end? I think the plan to grow the magazine through careful direct mail is a good one, but it won't generate significant profits for four or five years. Point will die if it tries to plod along. It needs to jump. Maybe it needs to take many jumps at once.

what Stewart fears

Priorities

Resources were drained years ago, and before the economy collapsed, it was possible to keep things going through miracles and workarounds. There hasn't been a miracle in a long time, and the workarounds are no longer workable. The morale among WER and Point staff is more important than ever at this point. First, they need a sense that the enterprise is going somewhere exciting. When I became editor and a Point director was hired, the sense of the place was that we couldn't keep going downhill financially for very much longer. We didn't go under, which means somebody did the right thing and/or nobody did the wrong thing. By now, however, we've learned that not going under is not enough. We need more hours for the editorial staff, more pay for existing staff, more money for contributers. We need to do the most elementary things that should have been done years ago: connecting the WER office to the WELL through wiring that already exists, which would cost less than $100 (I gave up on moving this task through the bureaucracy); getting the art director something a wee bit faster than an SE and a two-page screen. This is not wish-fulfillment; this is bringing the creative center of the enterprise out of the dark ages. We have volunteer computerization consultants up the yang, and there is a way of working Apple, Inc. that can shake loose some equipment very inexpensively, if not for free. With a networked DTP shop, it might even be possible to do some of those book projects that are too expensive the old way.

Another reason the old workarounds won't work is that the loss of the volleyball court, which happened before my tenure, meant the loss of day-to-day interactions that helped cement Point staff into a community. It's not just a matter of deck furniture. It's a matter of taking steps to recreate that opportunity for community at Point. Somebody needs to

create some cohesion by arranging circumstances for it to emerge, Chris Alexander style, rather than just by persuading people to decide to have regular morale meetings, Richard Stekel style. who?

I think a sense of direction is more important than anything else, including money. The next most immediate priority, however, is to give people, especially production staff and old-time editors, a raise. It doesn't have to be an extraordinary raise. Even with a full-time editor, the editorial assistant job shouldn't be attempted in less than 30 hours a week. Equally important is the editorial budget. The business of cajoling people to write for $50/page wears thin these days. WER could TRIPLE its rate and still be an order of magnitude lower than the big boys.

This sounds like a lot of sudden needs; it is actually the simultaneous arrival at the last bit of rope by several chronic needs. Somewhere in the filing cabinet of my office at Gate Five is Anne Herbert's essay on "strip-mining idealism." Kevin left it to haunt me, as Art had left it for him, and I will bequeath it to my successor. It is especially poignant to read now.

Scenarios

Driving Forces and Uncertainties:

We need to think through this together. Critical uncertainties that I can list are:

1. Can the right Point director be found and convinced to take the job?
2. Can the right WER editor be in place?
3. Will a direct mail capaign work?
4. Can the funds be found to take a quantum leap?

Editorial Scenarios

We need to think through this together.

1. WER finds a truly temporary editor and I take a true sabbatical.
2. Three guest editors take over in late Spring, 1991, one after the other, and I return in late Spring, 1993.
3. A suitable permanent replacement is found for me.
4....I direct an ensemble of editors.